Tank Warfare During the Rif Rebellion

1921-1927

by José E. Alvarez

"Armored cars and tanks are greatly suitable for this war. We shall see if time proves me right."[1] Major Francisco Franco Bahamonde, commander of the Ist *Bandera* (battalion) of the Spanish Foreign Legion, wrote these words following the less than auspicious debut of Spanish armor during the battle of Ambar in northern Morocco. Fought on March 18, 1922, Ambar saw the first use of tanks by the Spanish Army, and their earliest deployment on the African continent.

In order to better understand the Spanish Army's use of armor during the Rif Rebellion, a brief history of the conflict would be useful. Since 1909, Spanish forces in the eastern portion of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco had pushed outwards from Melilla towards the heartland of the Rif, and by 1921 they had almost reached the shores of Alhucemas Bay. In a bid for national independence, Mohamed ben Abd-el-Krim, along with his younger brother Mhamed, had led fellow tribesmen against Spain.

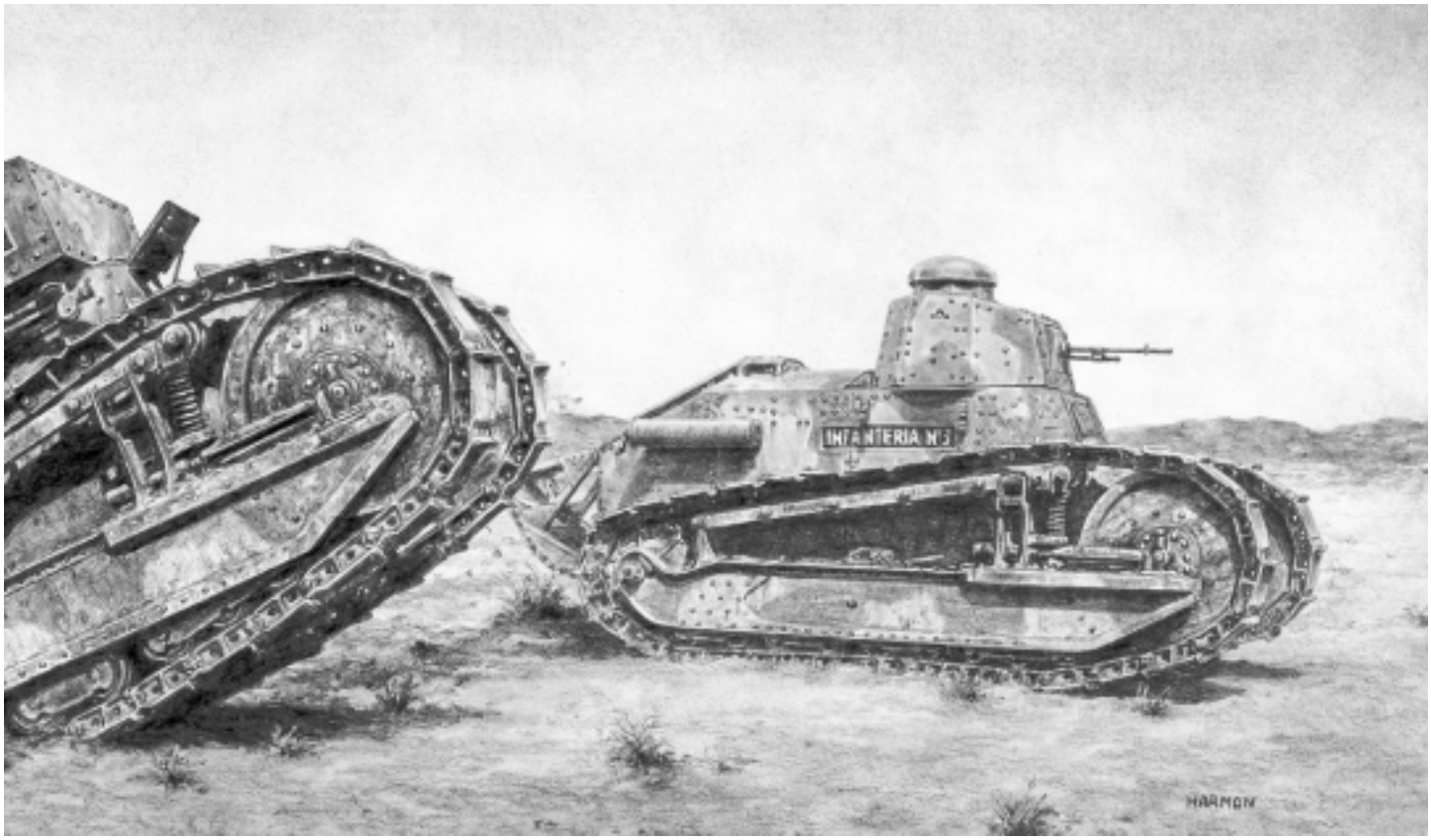
Fighting was most intense in a region the Spanish Army called the *comandancia de Melilla*. In late July 1921, the Krim brothers led an *harka* (war party) of tribesmen against Annual, Spain's main outpost in the area. This attracted the attention of Manuel Fernandez Silvestre, an audacious and impetuous cavalry general, commanding 20,000 men, who was pushing deep into rebel territory, hoping to reach Alhucemas Bay without securing his flank or rear. Krim counterattacked with roughly 3,000 warriors. Surrounded, and cutoff from reinforcements, one outpost after another fell to Krim's men.[2] Instead of a fighting retreat, Silvestre's army fell apart, as panic-stricken conscripts dropped their weapons and ran for their lives. The Riffians slaughtered those they caught, with soldiers and civilians alike being put to the knife. In the end, Spanish casualties numbered, at minimum, 12,000, with another 600 taken prisoner and held for ransom. Silvestre also perished at Annual, although it was never fully established if by the enemy, or his own hand. What had taken Spain twelve years of blood and treasure to conquer had been lost in only a few days. Spain's ignominious rout at the hands of Riffian tribesmen was the greatest defeat suffered by a European power in an African colonial conflict in the twentieth century.

The Annual disaster had two serious consequences for Spanish officials: an army of 20,000 men had been rendered militarily ineffective, and the rebels — who up to that time had been armed solely with antiquated rifles and daggers — were now in possession of a variety of modern artillery, small arms, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. The herculean task of reconquering the Melillan Command was given to the battle-tested *Tercio de Extranjeros* (the Spanish Foreign Legion) and the *Regulares* (native Moroccan troops commanded by Spanish officers). Spain rushed these units from the Western Zone of the Protectorate to save the enclave of Melilla from succumbing to the Riffians. The going was tough, with hard-fought battles taking place nearly every day, and with the Legion and *Regulares* always comprising the vanguard of Spanish forces. The cost in men and materiel, along with the difficulty of the terrain and the tenacity of the rebels, led to rumblings within the Spanish government to abandon its Protectorate completely. Krim's successes led to more and more tribes flocking to his side, which resulted in an open rebellion throughout the Protectorate.

By early 1922, Spanish forces continued with their drive to recover the area Spain had lost the previous year. The major outposts of Nador, Tauima, and Monte Arruit were back in Spanish hands, while the push to cross the Kert River was next on the agenda. This was done on January 10 with the capture of Dar Drius. Dar Drius served as the HQ for Spanish operations during the spring offensives in the region.

The major drive of the year, against the Beni Said and Beni Ulixech *kabyles* (tribes), began in March when the weather became more favorable for military offensive operations. Meanwhile, Lieutenant-Colonel Jose Millan-Astray, founder and commanding officer of the Spanish Foreign Legion, had returned to the front on February 14 after having been wounded for the second time during the campaign. General Federico Berenguer Fuste, brother of the High Commissioner, led the main column against the rebellious tribesmen. Millan-Astray led the Ist and IInd *Banderas* of the Legion (commanded by Majors Franco Bahamonde and Rodriguez Fontanes, respectively) on the advance which was scheduled to commence on March 18. Ambar/Anvar was the objective of that day's operation.[3]

By the standards of 1922, this offensive employed very modern equipment. Following the Annual disaster, the Spanish military realized the importance of utilizing the best weapons available to crush the rebellion. A commission, directed by the then Chief of Studies of the Infantry's Testing Ground (*Escuela Central de Tiro*), visited several European countries in the hope of acquiring tanks. He considered the British Whippet, but financial and political reasons led him to pass on it



in favor of French equipment. France's geographic proximity to Spain, as well as its shared interest in Morocco, contributed to the deal being consummated between Paris and Madrid. Consequently, in August 1921, the French prime minister authorized the sale of tanks, artillery, and airplanes to the Spanish Army. The tanks, known as "*carros de combate/asalto*" in Spain, arrived in January of the following year.[4]

The initial delivery to the Army numbered twelve 6.5-ton Renault FT-17s; eleven were armed with a 7-mm Hotchkiss machine gun, one served as a command tank (FT-17TSH). These twelve tanks were delivered to the Escuela Central de Tiro. Six Schneider CA1 tanks were also purchased and placed at the disposal of the artillery branch of the Army.

The FT-17s were incorporated into a company ("*Compañia de Carros de Asalto*"), with a command staff using the TSH, two platoons of five tanks each, as well as a support and repair unit. The twelfth tank would remain at the Testing Ground to be used in training. The company equipment also included twelve Renault tank transport trucks, two Hispano-Suiza tanker trucks, and a Ford light truck to transport stores. In addition, a repair truck which remained in Segovia, was never delivered. The staff consisted of a captain, two lieutenants, one sergeant-major, eight sergeants who would serve as TCs, and forty enlisted men (eleven tank drivers, twenty truck drivers, and nine mechanics and service personnel).[5]

King Alfonso XIII saw a demonstration of the new tanks at a military camp outside Madrid soon after their arrival. After a brief period of instruction for the new unit, the General Staff ordered that the tank company be transferred by rail to the port of Malaga on March 8, and from there by ship to Melilla. Once there, the unit was immediately sent to the encampment at Dar Drius. However, suitable shelter for the tanks from the inclement weather, as well as repair facilities, had not been established. This led the company commander, Captain José de Alfaro, to pen a terse report to Army HQ in Melilla. As a result, all tanks needing major repairs had to be sent from Dar Drius to the artillery's machine shop in Melilla.[6]

No more than two months had gone by since the tanks had arrived in Spain and they would now be pressed into service against the Beni Said tribe. On March 17, the company joined General F. Berenguer Fuste's column at the forward outpost of Itihuen/Ichtiuen. The following morning, at 0600 hours, the tank company began its advance with the infantry of the Foreign Legion deployed behind the FT-17s. The operation, which called for the capture of Tuguntz, succeeded in reaching and occupying the houses of Ambar/Anvar. Once there, however, they began to take heavy fire from their left flank. The tanks had advanced, over broken terrain, faster than their infantry, and a distance of some 800 meters separated them. The Riffians, undaunted by the appearance of these new war machines, surrounded the unprotected tanks and began hurling stones at them. Finding the machine gun's blind spots, they thrust their daggers (*gumias*) through the vision slits, injuring one machine gunner's face. Many of the tank's machine guns, installed the day before, jammed during firing due to faulty ammunition.

The tanks had to withdraw to rejoin the Legionnaires, but during the withdrawal, fighting continued, forcing some of the tankers to abandon their disabled or disarmed vehicles. The outcome of this less than auspicious event in the history of Spanish armor left two sergeants and one enlisted driver wounded, and three tanks disabled. Lacking the necessary recovery equipment, two of the tanks had to be left on the battlefield where the Riffians blew them up with dynamite four days later.[7]

The Army's General Staff examined the lackluster performance of the tanks, and concluded that the determining factor in the fiasco was the lack of coop-

eration between the infantry and tanks. The gap which developed between the two elements, as well as the failure of the machine guns, were also important contributing factors. It was also noted that the tanks had been rushed to the front without the opportunity for coordinated training/exercises with the infantry.[8]

For the remainder of the campaign in the Protectorate, tanks were used on a smaller scale, to provide support during retreats, in punitive operations, in wheeled-vehicle recovery, and in reconnaissance operations with cavalry and infantry units. They would once again be used in a major operation during the amphibious landings at Alhucemas Bay in September, 1925, where the company of FT-17s were to disembark first in order to provide fire support for the infantry who followed them ashore. The landing craft, however, struck a shoal, forcing the infantry and artillery to disembark unassisted. The tanks were brought ashore the following day, where they provided support for the left flank of the beachhead and, with the collaboration of the VIth and VIIth *Banderas* of the Legion, advanced to take the strategic heights/line of Malmusi Alto, Malmusi Bajo, and Morro Viejo.[9] With the successful landing at Alhucemas Bay by the Spanish Army, the defeat of Krim and his "Rif Republic" was assured. The war would continue, with less intensity, until peace was declared in mid-1927.

In conclusion, Spain's first use of armor during the Rif rebellion in Morocco resulted in a minor setback. Nevertheless, among the farsighted officers of the Army, the use of tanks in a colonial setting, where difficult terrain would be encountered, was a reality. In this type of campaign, it was of the utmost importance that armor and infantry provide mutual support. If not, either could be easily cut off and destroyed.

This not only happened to Spanish tanks at Ambar, but to Italian armor during the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-36. Greater mechanical reliability, along with better ammunition, improved the fighting capability of Spanish tanks during the rebellion, and even though they did not play a major role during the Alhucemas Bay landings, they were available to provide fire support if called upon to do so.

Within the Spanish Army, there was no turning back. Armor was here to stay.

Notes

[1]Francisco Franco Bahamonde, *Marruecos: Diario De Una Bandera* (Madrid: 1922), p. 177. On pp. 177-179, Franco detailed his personal opinions on the employment of tanks in the Moroccan Campaign, as well as his numerous recommendations for improvement. While others in the military declared that 'The tanks have failed,' or 'Tanks are useless in Morocco; they are inappropriate in this terrain,' he (along with Genereal Damaso Berenguer Fuste, High Commissioner of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco) believed otherwise. He boldly stated that, "Los carros de asalto y tanques son de gran aplication en esta guerra. Veremos si el tiempo me da la razon."

[2]David S. Woolman, *Rebels in the Rif: Abd el Krim and the Rif Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 102.

[3]John Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, Osprey Men-At-Arms Series, no. 161 (London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1985), pp. 11-12.

[4]*Defensa*, no. 144, April 1990, "Los Carros de Asalto Españoles en la Campaña de Marreucos," p. 62.

[5]Ibid., p. 63. *TSH* is the Spanish translation of the French *TSF* (i.e., Telegraph without wire or radio-equipped). Javier de Mazarrasa, *Blindados En España, 1ª Parte: La Guerra Civil 1936-1939, Nº.2* (Valladolid: Quiron Ediciones, 1991), p. 18. This source recorded that only eleven FT-17s were purchased, including the TSH. For more on the FT-17 light tank, including specifications, see Kenneth Macksey and John H. Batchelor, *Tank: A History of the Armored Fighting Vehicle* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 38-39, and Christopher F. Foss, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the World's Tanks and Fighting Vehicles: A technical directory of major combat vehicles from World War I to the present day*, with a Foreword by Richard M. Ogorkiewicz (New York: Chartwell Books, Inc.,), pp. 70-71.

[6]*Defensa*, p. 63.

[7]Ibid., pp. 63-64. Franco, pp. 175-177. Woolman, p. 105. It is interesting to note that during the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935-1936, the Ethiopians fought the Italian CV-33/5 light tanks in similar fashion. Major General J.F.C. Fuller, *The First of the League Wars, its lessons and omens* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1936), p. 68, (n. 1), described Ethiopian antitank methods thus:

They lay up for tanks when they attempt to cross difficult ground, rushed them from behind, scrambled on their backs, and then leaning over the roof of the cab smashed the muzzles of the [2] machine guns with a rock. I also heard that sometimes they poured petrol over a tank and set it alight.

For more on the role of the Legion, which suffered 86 casualties during this battle (one of them being Major Fontanes, CO of the IInd *Bandera*, who was KIA), see José E. Alvarez, "The Betrothed of Death: The Spanish Foreign Legion during the Rif Rebellion, 1920-1927" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1995), pp. 147-149.

[8]*Defensa*, p. 64. On page 9 of a manuscript provided to the writer by Colonel of Infantry (Legion) Ramón Moya Ruiz entitled "Los Medios Blindados y La Legion," the author noted the following causes for the failure of the tanks at the battle of Ambar and what needed to be done to rectify the situation:

- It was necessary to install two machine guns instead of the single one provided.
- Improve the quality of the ammunition to avoid interruptions [jamming].
- Better trained personnel with combat experience.
- Tanks, in this type of campaign, should be employed with mutual support from infantry.
- The threat to tanks will come from: artillery, antitank rifles [i.e., the 13-mm Mauser T-Gewehr of 1918] and machine guns.

[9]Moya Ruiz, pp. 11-12. *Defensa*, p. 64. Scurr, pp. 16-17.

Renault FT-17—Technical Data

Crew: 2.

Armament: One Hotchkiss 7mm machine gun.

Armor: 22mm (0.87in) maximum; 6mm (0.24in) minimum.

Dimensions: Length (with tail) 16ft 5in (5m); width 5ft 9in (1.74m); height 6ft 7in (2.14m).

Weight: Combat 15,432 lbs (7,000kg).

Ground Pressure: 8.5lb/in^2 (0.59kg/cm^2).

Engine: Renault four-cylinder water-cooled gasoline engine developing 35bhp at 1,500 rpm.

Performance: Road speed 4.7mph (7.7km/h); road range 22 miles (35km); vertical obstacle 2ft (0.6m); trench crossing (with tail) 5ft 11in (1.8m), (without tail) 4ft 5in (1.35m); gradient 50 percent.

Adapted from Christopher F. Foss, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the World's Tanks and Fighting Vehicles.*

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